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Johnson, Lyndon B.
Vantage Point
Orig. under
Johnson

To Run or Not to Run?

'60 Doubts Recur in '64

This is the third of 15 excerpts from former President Johnson's book, "The Vantage Point," an account of his presidency, to be published shortly.

"THE 1964 CAMPAIGN"

Throughout the period between the 1956 convention and the 1960 convention, when my name was placed in nomination, I was aware, and gratefully so, of the growing interest in me expressed by people who approved of the way I was handling my job in the Senate. But I never encouraged any effort to promote me as a Presidential candidate.

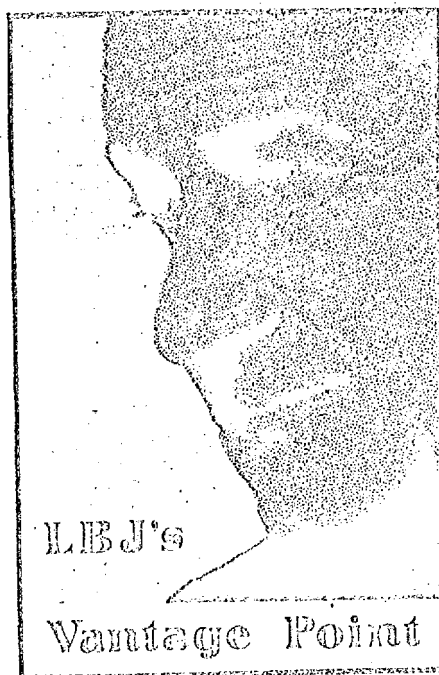
My position had not changed when the political campaign season of 1960 came around. I still had no enthusiasm for running. Once again Sam Rayburn tried to force me into the race.

My objections were consistently the same: I was satisfied with my job, and a Southerner could not, and probably should not, be elected.

Finally, the Speaker presented his argument this way: Even if I did not win, he thought I could run a better race against John Kennedy for the nomination than any of the other candidates, none of whom could command substantial Southern support. If a strong contest were not made, he said, it would look as if the Catholic bosses behind Kennedy were running the Democratic party. He went down the list—Carmin De Sapio in New York, David Lawrence in Pennsylvania, Michael DiSalle in Ohio, Richard Daley in Chicago, Pat Brown in California. For the Democratic party to win, he said, we would have to show great diversified strength.

Mr. Rayburn was very much afraid of Richard Nixon's being elected. He believed Nixon had called him and President Truman traitors. Nixon always denied this. (Later Nixon showed me the words he had said that led to what he considered Mr. Rayburn's misunderstanding, and it seemed to me that he was being open and honest about it.) But the Speaker went to his grave believing that Nixon had impugned his patriotism, and he did not want Nixon to be President.

Shortly after that, on June 23, Philip Graham, publisher of The Washington Post, privately and personally made much the same argument for my candidacy. Graham strongly believed that



a contest would be good for the party and, incidentally, for my leadership in the Senate. He offered to make a contribution to launch the race and to help me prepare the statement announcing that I would try for the nomination.

So only six days before the convention opened on July 11, in the auditorium of the new Senate Office Building in an open press conference, I reluctantly announced my candidacy for the Democratic nomination for the Presidency with a statement Graham helped me prepare. Once I was committed, I fought with all the energy I possessed.

The night John Kennedy won the nomination, I sent him a telegram of congratulations.

The phone woke me about an hour after midnight. The caller was Speaker Rayburn. He told me he had heard that I was to be offered the Vice Presidential nomination, and he hoped that under no circumstances would I accept it. I thought it was most unlikely that I would be offered the nomination, but I assured him that I had no intention of accepting it if it were offered. I had not wanted the top spot on the ticket; the second spot appealed to me considerably less.

I went back to sleep. A few hours later the phone awakened me again. This time it was Jack Kennedy. He

said he would like to come by and talk to me. I suggested that I come to see him instead, but he insisted that he would come to my room. He arrived about midmorning. He said he had given a lot of thought to putting together a ticket that could win the election. Adlai Stevenson's two defeats, he said, were very much on his mind. He had thought it over carefully and had concluded that he wanted me on the ticket with him. He told me frankly that he had also considered Senators Stuart Symington and Henry Jackson and Governor Orville Freeman of Minnesota, but that he did not believe any of them could assure support in the Southern states, which he thought was crucial. He was sure I would attract such support, so he was asking me to be his Vice Presidential running mate.

I thanked him for his frankness and his consideration of me, but I told him that I was interested only in being the party's Majority Leader in the Senate and in helping him to get a strong program enacted when he was elected. Anyway, I said, I had assured Speaker Rayburn that I would not take the second spot. Kennedy asked if I had any objection to his talking to Mr. Rayburn.

"No, of course not," I said.

He left then and went to Mr. Rayburn's room. Soon afterward the Speaker came to see me. He had a recommendation which astonished me. He said he thought that I should go on the ticket with Kennedy. I pointed out to him that only a few hours earlier he had told me under no circumstances should I do that. Now he was asking just the opposite. Why?

I remember his words very clearly. "Because," he said, "I'm a damn sight wiser man this morning than I was last night." Kennedy had persuaded him that without me on the ticket he could not carry the South, perhaps not even one Southern state. That would guarantee the election to the Republicans.

Bobby Kennedy came to my room later that morning. He said he thought I ought to know that Walter Reuther and Governor G. Mennen Williams of Michigan were both very upset that John Kennedy had decided to put a Southerner on the ticket. I told Bobby that I appreciated his concern, but that his information did not greatly surprise me. Later Bobby talked to Mr. Rayburn and John Connally and told them he thought I should be made Democratic National Chairman. Mr. Rayburn—as he later reported it to me—asked him: "Who speaks for the Kennedys?" When Bobby replied that it was Jack Kennedy, Rayburn made it clear that Jack Kennedy was the only one he would listen to.

Phil Graham also urged me to take the Vice Presidential nomination. So did my own friends, and I was tired of mine of long standing, who was knowledgeable about politics and the Washington scene.